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Reflections on German Higher Education

Dear Harold,

I've promised you some reflections on my eight months at the University of Frankfurt. Here they are, a mixture of observation, personal experience, and historical reflection. I hope, despite their subjective base, that they may have some value to those interested in the comparative understanding of higher education.

In a personal sense, my experience here started my first year in graduate school as an M.A. candidate in American history at Columbia. I didn't like that year, it was one of intellectual adjustment, but in retrospect I find I learned a lot then, more through my reading than my classes. My classes disappointed me; they seemed able only to satisfy a desire to become a competent, but rather narrow specialist, whereas I had expected them to speak to the many-sided, almost Faustian intellectual curiosity raging in me. As an escape, I set about on my own to understand the history of American higher education, hoping thus to find a way to what I wanted. To begin with I read Hofstadter and Smith's collection of documents on American Higher Education; I read them with real thoroughness: I would sit hour after hour in the cafeteria in Ferris Booth, reading each document several times, analyzing, comparing, searching for the place of human intellect in the American academic enterprise.

This collection includes quite a number of nineteenth-century reminiscences by American educational reformers of their experiences as students in German universities. Their enthusiastic descriptions of seats of true learning where dedicated men tried to form and communicate a complete, systematic, and grounded understanding of the world seemed to me to describe the ideal university I

sought. When I had exhausted these documents, I turned to Hofstadter and Metzger's history of The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States and in that I was thrilled by Metzger's description of Lehrfreiheit and Lernfreiheit in the German tradition. I formed a very idealized image of the nineteenth-century German university as the only true university and committed myself to the pursuit of this ideal. By that time it was the Spring and I had enrolled in Larry Cremin's colloquium, finding it the first course at Columbia that spoke to my intellectual curiosity in a way that was consistent with my newly formed academic ideal. My first personal talk with him came at a time when my frustration with the rest of my studies was at a high point. I was ready to leave Columbia, to go to Germany where I could study in a way that did not do violence to my intellectual aspirations.

Larry's advice was good: to hold onto my aspirations while giving Columbia a longer try, and I am glad I did, for I increasingly found that I could act on my Lernfreiheit with good results and that there were numerous professors speaking significantly from their Lehrfreiheit, for me most meaningfully, Cremin, Dworkin, Barzun, and Trilling. But my idealized picture of what a German university would be like remained there in the back of my head as did the desire to go to Germany for a sustained period of true study.

As my knowledge of the academic world became greater, I became aware the historical actuality of the nineteenth-century German university at best only approximated, now and then, here and there, the idealized image I had formed of it. And I further came to know that during the Weimar and Hitler times, severe weaknesses in the German academic tradition had become apparent, and that since World War II the German universities had gone through profound transformations. This knowledge made me a good deal more realistic about what one would actually experience in a German university. At the same time, my work on Ortega, who

really came alive intellectually as a result of his studies in Germany, deepened my sense of what one might find through the German university when, in a particular case, it functioned close to the ideal. I began to grapple with cultural and academic problems with a better command of the intellectual traditions involved; I began to enter as critical participant the European traditions of systematic speculation in the Geisteswissenschaften.

Then in the summer of 1970, I spent a month and a half at the University of Marburg, my first personal experience of German university realities. There I was very much an outsider: I saw the problems of expansion, attended only a few lectures, festered in frustration with the language. Really my only constructive achievement was to become familiar with the library of the Pedagogical Seminar and the reference collection in the general library, and even my reading knowledge of German was still so limited that I could only get a sense of what was in these libraries, I could not even begin to absorb these collections into my stock of working knowledge. The following summer I spent six weeks in Germany and six weeks in France dashing compulsively, somewhat comically, from university to university, two days at Frankfurt, one at Mainz, two at Munich, and so on. I assembled catalogues, was compulsively drawn to the libraries, and spent a very large sum in bookstores. I superficially saw some of the problems, talked to very few people, but managed to further extend my sense of what there was to learn if ever I could impose enough discipline on myself to master the language.

There followed a few years spent in groping on the home front. For personal reasons I had trouble getting back to Europe and for professional reasons, perhaps for psychological reasons too, I had trouble turning my rudimentary command of German into a working intellectual tool. My collection of German books remained on my shelves, tantalizing me. I started reading less philosophy and more in literature and political theory; I was broadening rather randomly my sense of

experience and my command of tradition, but I was also drifting without a clear sense of purpose through a vast heritage of cultural, political, and personal reflections. As my sabbatical approached, I made plans to spend it at home groping further, hopefully writing I was not really sure what. Then ten days before my sabbatical was to start my personal situation unexpectedly changed and I suddenly confronted the disappearance of all my routines, personal and professional. Everything seemed thrown up in the air, everything seemed in question, and overnight the long attraction of the German university reawakened. My best contact was at Frankfurt -- I wrote a letter announcing my intention to appear there shortly; I bought a plane ticket, raised enough money to scrape along on for six to eight months; I discussed my sudden resolve frenziedly with colleagues, friends, and family. Ten days later I was here in Frankfurt, walking the streets in search of a room.

During the days of compulsive talking preceding my departure, I tried out for myself all sorts of roles that I might assume while I was here -- journalist, researcher, visiting professor, Tocquevillean observer -- but my real intention from the start was the one I had announced to my contact here: to live and work as a student. For personal and intellectual reasons I wanted to start in obscurity and my first task was to learn the language. I worked hard at that on my own -- studying grammar for long stints daily in my room and spending the evenings at my personal Sprachlabor, a nearby Bierstube where I found ample opportunity to converse in German and formed my first personal friendships here. I also attended at the start quite a number of courses on themes I thought would interest me and my overall reaction was one of dismay: all at once the problems I had known about and seen from the outside became parts of my experience. Numbers: sitting there in a seminar with 120 others in a room not big enough for fifty, bodies filling the chairs and windowsills, covering the tables and floor, all gasping the

exhausted air: was this Lernfreiheit? Professorial aloofness: another seminar, not so overcrowded, in which the professor devoted the first three meetings to reading in a dead monotone from outdated lexicons: was this Lehrfreiheit? As a student, like many others, I turned to the libraries as my real source of learning.

As the months passed, through study, conversation, and reading, my command of German increased, although it is still far from correct fluency. My friendships continued to be primarily with students and people on the periphery of the university. Through books I began to enter into the German academic ~~work~~ world with firsthand substantive involvement for the first time. And finally, through reflection, I began to inform my diverse studies over the last few years with a renewed sense of purpose. All of this greatly raised my confidence, and I decided to emerge a bit out of my obscurity by arranging to teach a course or two in the current semester here. As you know, as things turned out, I'm giving two, one on Democracy and Education in Nineteehth Century Pedagogy and the other on the German Influence on American Education. Through my experience of these courses I've quite unexpectedly come to a much clear understanding of both the German and American academic traditions and their relations to one another.

To begin with, I need to explain some things about the content and form of these courses. My resolve to give them came late, too late for their inclusion in the course catalogue, a godsend that enabled me to finesse the problem of numbers here -- rather than having too many students, both courses have too few -- four and five. Second, the University of Frankfurt, as you know, has become a large urban university, an expansion university most of whose students are not university students in the old sense, working for doctorates in academic areas; instead the students are working for professional diplomas, more often than not in various areas of education. All my students are preparing to be

teachers either in the elementary schools or in special education: they are intelligent, but neither well prepared nor particularly interested in investigating difficult historical questions on an advanced level. Third, even in familiar academic settings it is hard enough to prepare new courses on short notice and in a foreign setting it is all the harder: hence I've had trouble working out suitable programs of reading in both courses to sustain the discussion of themes I had hoped to generate. And finally, the continuing limitations of my German and the correlative limitations of the students' English have put real limits on communication in class. Thus by normal measures, the classes are falling far short of what I would like them to be. We've had to adapt to all sorts of realities as we go along.

I won't burden you with a full analysis of the few ups and many downs of these attempts at cross-cultural communication. What I want to explain here is how, through them, I've come better to understand German and American academic traditions. In the course on "Democracy and Education" I have had to concern myself again with American education and thought in a way that I have not done for a long time; I've once again taken up Jefferson, Mann, and Dewey; I've again been reading in American educational and intellectual history; I've anew been reflecting on the nature of American thought and character. Ironically, as a result I am finding that far from learning how to be a European among Europeans, I have brought with me far more of my homeland heritage than I ever realized was in me. In the course on "The German Influence in American Education," I had to go back over the sources of my old idealized image of the German university: I've reread the documents in Hofstadter and Smith and studied anew Metzger's discussion of the German influence on American higher education. In addition I've looked more deeply into the ideas of vonHumboldt, Schleiermacher, Fichte, and Schelling. I've been able to better relate my slowly accumulated knowledge

of the substantive achievements of nineteenth-century German academics to these ideals, and I've read a good deal about the experience of German academic emigres to the United States on the collapse of the German academic world in the 1930's.

These substantive intellectual concerns were at the heart of the problems of communications with which I was struggling in my classes. I was a bit mystified by what was happening in both classes. I felt that after all the external difficulties were discounted, after recognizing that the classes were somewhat too small, that prior preparation by myself and the students was imperfect, and that language often worked as a block, not a means, to communication, after all this, something else was also missing. I felt that the students were expecting something of me that I was not giving and that I was expecting something of them that they were not giving. For some weeks I was acutely disoriented by this feeling, but unable to find its sources. Then I read Theodor Adorno's account of his frustrations as an emigre participant in the American intellectual world and everything fell into place.

Adorno's plight was that of a speculative, theoretical sociologist, whose work was grounded in systematic philosophy and aimed at an interpretation of social phenomena, suddenly displaced into a world of American empiricism. It would be too simple to say that my situation is exactly the reverse: I am by no means a pure specimen of American empiricism and the current German academic culture has largely lost its grounding in systematic philosophy. But I immediately saw that to understand what was not happening in my classes I had to take into account the substantial influence of empiricism on my style of teaching and the substantial influence of the German theoretical tradition on my student's style of study. And on doing this, I gained an insight that seems to me to explain something profound about contemporary German university problems.

From my first unhappy experiences in graduate school, and even before then,

I had conceived of myself intellectually as European, not American. European culture and education became my domain. I scorned the intellectual limitations of the specialized American empiricist. I thought of myself as spokesman for the continuing vitality and value of the speculative, critical tradition in Western thought. On reading Adorno's essay I fully identified with his aims and methods as an intellectual, and I could respond to the pains and frustrations he felt in the American intellectual world with real immediacy because I too had felt and will feel, again and again, those pains. But my recent reading on America had prepared me to read Adorno's essay with something less than complete identification with him -- he described himself as born and bred in the European tradition, as someone whose individuality was rooted in it. At that point I had to recognize myself as American, as someone whose identification with the European was at most intellectual. I had to recognize myself as an American abroad and admit that until this year even all the travel that I had done in Europe, which has been very, very extensive, was almost exclusively done in the company of Americans.

With that, suddenly, among other things, I recognized my style of teaching and study as a highly American style, one deeply influenced by empirical preoccupations. On understanding the character of my own style of teaching and study, I was immediately able to see essential differences between it and the style of teaching and study characteristic in the German universities. With that I became able to understand, not only what was amiss in my courses, but also what is really happening in the profound changes taking place in the German universities.

To make myself clear on this without having to take into account endless details, I will construct a pair of ideal types, an empirical style and a speculative style. The former aims to impart mastery over a body of fact, the

latter to communicate a system of interpretive principles. The pattern of exchange characteristic with the empirical style is that the teacher presents the students with a set of facts and expects the students to generate interpretive hypotheses making sense of the facts which the teacher then tries to utilize constructively by presenting further facts that reinforce effective interpretations and undercut erroneous ones. The pattern of exchange characteristic with the speculative style is that the teacher first presents a system of principles and expects the students to find problematic elements in them which the teacher will then try to rectify by the further elaboration of the principles. Where the empirical style is dominant, the ideal of achievement is the full mastery of all pertinent facts and with the speculative style the ideal of achievement is the complete development of an internally consistent system of theory. In American higher education the empirical style is heavily dominant and in German higher education the speculative style still remains supreme. Perhaps the clearest example of this difference is to be found in comparing methods of legal education, for the case method characteristic in American law schools is almost a pure example of the empirical style and the juristic methods in the German universities are good examples of the speculative style.

With my two courses, the problem with them, after everything else is discounted, is simply that I have been trying to teach in a predominantly empirical style while the students have been trying to study in a predominantly speculative style. Thus, I tried to plunge them into a set of facts, in both cases a rather extensive set of historical texts, which I've waited for them to interpret as they saw fit to do. They, of course, have been expecting something very different from me, an exposition of interpretive principles, which they can assess for internal consistency and completeness. I found them strangely incapable of absorbing and reacting to information and they found me strangely unable to carry a line of

reasoning through to a coherent conclusion. Thus we haven't yet begun to communicate, and whether in the few remaining weeks, while grappling with all the other problems attendant to the courses, we can fruitfully adapt our academic styles to one another is, I fear, doubtful.

Be that as it may, the chance for me to become consciously aware of this clash in styles has been very fruitful. I now have a much better understanding of what is happening here around me. And what follows is a very rapid exposition of it. The historic strength of the German university has been as a site for the speculative style in advanced learning. The early nineteenth-century reformers of German higher education perceived that the Wissenschaft that had rather spontaneously risen to a high level of development in Germany was a science that aimed at the systematic elaboration of interpretive principles and they set about to design a better academic environment for that endeavor. The clearest statement of that purpose is Wilhelm vonHumboldt's essay on "The Inner and Outer Organization of Intellectual Institutions." All sorts of signs point to the fact that they were basically successful in stamping this style on German higher education. The great fruits of German academic culture from Kant, Fichte, and Hegel through Weber, Scheler, Jaspers, Mannheim, Husserl, Heidegger, and Adorno show what it can achieve in operation. Even the renegade geniuses -- Marx and Nietzsche -- in rejecting it, show many of its features in their work. American enthusiasts of the German example from Ticknor through Flexner, all single out the speculative style, with its capacity for systematic, rigorous, comprehensive theorizing, as the great positive feature of German higher education. And in the great diaspora, in field after field, it was primarily a capacity to theorize that the German academics brought to American higher education.

This diaspora was the first of a series of challenges that have severely shaken the place of the speculative style in German higher education. For over

ten years Hitler silenced the German intellect. Many of the best thinkers left and only a few later returned. Others were temporarily silenced, some permanently. And then, following the war extensive reforms were made throughout the German educational system which have come to have a profound effect on the inner and outer organization of the German university. These changes were initiated, it now seems to me, with only very superficial consideration of their effects on the life of intellect in Germany. The professed purpose behind these changes was an attempt to democratize German education, somewhat in the image of American education. But I think the main result of these changes has been to radicalize German education, especially higher German education, precisely because too little attention was paid to the contrast between the empirical style dominant in American teaching and study and the speculative style characteristic of the German tradition.

To move towards the democratization of education access to the university had to be expanded; in its practical implementation, this meant lowering the standards for the Abitur and increasing the capacity of the universities. You are better informed than I am about the diverse problems, possibilities, and disappointments that the carrying through of this expansion has so far created, and I have no intention of here going over these. Instead, I intend to analyze their effects on the speculative style that has been the characteristic genius of German academic life, for I think one gains from that analysis some important insights.

To begin with, I will start with what seems to me to be a fact: the speculative style still seems to characterize German academic work, but the capacity to employ it to achieve the highest levels of comprehensive, consistent interpretation seems to have been lost by German academics. I hope this "fact" proves to be a mistake, a creature of my very limited perception. But presently,

right or wrong, it is my perception. The speculative style still seems to characterize academic work in that students still primarily study theory and professors still aspire to work out a theoretical treatment of their fields. But the capacity to employ the speculative style to achieve the highest levels of comprehensive, consistent interpretation seems to have been lost, primarily in that specialization has taken hold and the fields that the professors aspire to treat theoretically are far more circumscribed and the theories that students study pertain most often to particular, isolated aspects of thought. The causes giving rise to this fact lie not in any mysterious intellectual weaknesses in the current generation of German professors and students, but in the structural effects on the speculative style of the policy of expansion.

Traditionally, the German university has been a rather small university: the number of students at each were, compared to recent norms, very limited, and each discipline was represented by but one or two professors and a few docents. The drawback of this smallness has been much critized -- it made the university a very elitist institution. But the advantage of this smallness for the speculative style has been inadequately emphasized -- it made the intellectual domain open to each professor and student very large and thus it encouraged the drive towards attaining a comprehensive system of interpretive principles. If the drive towards the democratization of German higher education had been taken at a time of self-confidence among German academics, the great increase in capacity would have been made by greatly increasing the number of German universities while preserving their relative smallness in size. Instead, the democratization came at a time when American prestige, intellectual and political, was greatly inflated and the German university form was renounced in favor of the form of the large American state universities with very little attention paid to the differences in style characteristic in the two traditions.

All the major universities have grown drastically. At most campuses the faculties and student bodies are usually more than four times as large as they were in the years prior to Hitler. True, American universities have expanded to the same, sometimes to greater, degrees without disasterous strains. But the empirical style, far from being threatened by specialization, approaches perfection through it. The effects on the speculative style, however, are fundamentally different. As each professor's domain is reduced in scope he is more and more estranged from the possibility of achieving comprehensiveness in his work. The new structure of the German university, its scale, cuts the German professor off from achieving the real fruition of his characteristic intellectual style and the effects of this structurally imposed intellectual frustration of the professors are devastating.

German students still expect, deep down, to encounter well-grounded, systematic, comprehensive interpretations of the world in their university studies: their whole cultural tradition teaches them to expect that that is the ideal optimally to be attained. Instead, they encounter an array of theoretical fragments, which they basically scorn as the fruits of fachidiotie. Disappointed, many resign themselves to a directionless professionalism, determining to acquire certificates requisite for good jobs and good earnings, hopefully thus guaranteeing at least material well-being within a drifting and meaningless system. Others reach out to the only ready-made intellectual system available on the perifery of the university, thus ensconcing themselves in one or another variant of dogmatic Marxism. In the face of the overall frustration of the academic endeavor, it alone seems sufficiently comprehensive and adaptive to link everything together in a comprehensive interpretation. But it seems to be something very different from the critical, constructive use of Marx by Weber, Mannheim, Adorno, in their efforts to work out independent principles of interpretation; rather it seems to

be a desperate, dogmatic effort to substitute an ersatz for interpretive principles, a repertory of ready interpretations that are imposed casuistically on every case that arises. Perhaps this judgment is too severe; perhaps the variants of Marxism that are increasingly the only systematic views available in the German universities will prove productive, productive of genuine, well-grounded interpretive systems. Be that as it may, I think they will continue to provide a large part of the German academic community with a sense of system, until the German academics once again prove capable of bringing the speculative style to the highest levels of fruition, generating comprehensive, consistent systems of interpretive principles that can structure a more meaningful understanding of contemporary realities. But such a reawakening of the speculative style seems most unlikely unless German educational leaders do something drastic to cope with the gargantuan scale that has estranged the German academic from the genius of his tradition.